

Managing Conflict Creatively

I attended a workshop with this title last summer at the Evangelism & Church Growth conference last summer and wanted to share what I took away.

- Churches that have turned around learned how to deal with conflict(s), and dealt with them. Churches had deeply held issues that were so buried some weren't even acknowledging they were there.
 - Churches that dwindled never dealt w/ their conflicts, avoided them.
- Every ministry has it's mountains, it's conflicts.
 - We are surprised by conflict in the church, and yet Jesus was walking conflict! Just the idea of Jesus brought conflict. *Expect* conflict!
 - John 16:33 – In this world there will be tribulation...
 - Pray, not to be conflict-free, but to manage it well, get through it, & grow.
- We go to great lengths to avoid conflict, avoid disrupting that status quo!
 - **But if you don't deal with them on the front end, you'll end up dealing with them on the back end!**

Symptoms of conflict:

- Internal division,
- us vs. them mentality,
- Unfocused feelings of anxiety, anger, mistrust, and fear which leads to long unproductive meetings, accusations and decisions in secret, gradually decreasing attendance, loss of income, loss of membership.

Where there is no struggle, there is no progress. – Frederick Douglass

Acts 6:1-7 (choosing the 7 to lead the ministry to the widows)

The apostles did 3 things to deal with the situation:

1. Desensitized the issue
 - a. Make it less of a hot button
 - b. Free (someone) from a phobia or neurosis by gradually exposing the person to the thing that is feared
 - c. Leave ego at the door.
2. Deliberation about the issue
 - a. The presented problem is not always the problem
 - i. We all have inner voices/records that play – sexism, racism, rejection, etc.
 - ii. Achieving clarity of communication is important! Work *hard* at figuring out exactly what the issue is.
 - b. Fair fighting
 - i. Having an attitude of mutual respect
 1. No “people are saying” comments

2. No blaming
3. No labeling
4. No interrogating
5. No personalizing issues
6. Stick to the subject
7. Don't fight dirty
8. Learn to negotiate
9. Don't lose humor!
- ii. Speak for yourself and not for others
- iii. Use "I" statements
- iv. Strive for "win-win"
- v. If a session member says it's their job to bring the concerns of an individual to you tell them, No, it's not. They can bring the person to the meeting and the person can bring the issue themselves. (Otherwise it's triangulation.)
3. Decision – make one!

When we spend more time in Bible study and relationship building at the beginning of our meetings, they go better.

- By doing a Bible or book study with your leaders and others in your congregation, you are building more of a relationship with them – they're getting to know you more and you're getting to know them more (if you're being honest and transparent in your discussions).
 - All of this *builds TRUST*.

Resources:

(from the conference)

Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict, George Bullard, (Chalice Press, 2008).

Managing Church Conflict, Hugh Halverstadt, (Westminster, John Knox, 1991).

The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb, Eric Law, (Chalice Press, 1993).

Spiritlinking Leadership, Donna Markham, (Paulist Press, 1999).

(from Sally)

Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action, Deborah Van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, (Westminster, John Knox, 2013).

The Sacred Wilderness of Pastoral Ministry, David Rohrer (particularly chapter 7), (IVP Books, 2012).

Church on the Couch: Does the Church Need Therapy?, Elaine Martens Hamilton, (Zondervan, 2009).

I highly recommend the PC(USA)'s Evangelism & Church Growth Conference. Besides being held at an amazing resort in St. Pete Beach, Florida, I found the workshops and plenary speakers to be excellent – as well as the conversations over meals! It's energizing to talk with the NCD folks especially as they are optimistic, energetic, and missional – full of ideas and things that can cross-over to existing church ministry and redevelopment work.

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